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Moscow's Angolan gamble

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As the Libyan forces of Col. Muammar Qaddafi clashed sharply with the U.S. Navy off the Mediterranean coast of Africa, a more decisive confrontation with wider strategic consequences looms ahead in southern Africa.

In Angola, the stage is secretly being set for a massive new Soviet-backed offensive to destroy finally the UNITA guerrillas led by Dr. Jonas Savimbi.

Since the coordinated attack last September failed to dislodge Mr. Savimbi's forces from their southern base, the Marxist MPLA regime in Luanda and its Soviet and Cuban supporters have clearly resolved to try again, on a larger scale. Confirmed by U.S. intelligence, a major Soviet sea and airlift of modern planes, helicopters, tanks, and artillery has been followed up by the movement southward of an entire Cuban regiment, which now is poised for attack from its most advanced position on the southern front.

In view of the prolonged wet season with unusually heavy rains, Reagan officials do not expect the main assault to begin until the end of April or early May. But they expect then "a maximum effort" under the direction of Soviet officers and with many of the 35,000 Cuban troops in Angola committed to frontline fighting in order to break the stalemate.

If Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev succeeds in this calculated gamble, on which he has wagered a billion dollars in advanced weaponry, the glittering prize will be the removal of UNITA as an effective force and the opening up of strategic vistas for the advance of Soviet influence into Namibia, Zaire, and South Africa.

For Fidel Castro, a definitive defeat of UNITA would end the steady erosion of his popularity at home as the result of mounting Cuban casualties.

For President Eduardo dos Santos in the Angolan capital, Mr. Savimbi's defeat would allow him to extend the control of the MPLA regime throughout the country and to end a decade of civil war.

In the face of this imminent offensive, both Reagan officials and UNITA leaders display a remarkable degree of quiet confidence that the attack can be successfully contained.

Jeremias Chitunda is Mr. Savimbi's foreign policy adviser and is in Washington for consultations. When questioned on his reasons for being so sure that UNITA can defend itself, he gives an impressively detailed and coherent explanation.

First, during the long rainy season, the UNITA guerrillas have been able "to make substantial territorial gains" and have extended their effective influence over nearly half the country. In the northeastern province of Lunda, a UNITA offensive has brought more than 75 percent of Angolan diamond production under its control and given Mr. Savimbi a valuable new source of hard currency.

Moreover, UNITA commanders have made good use of the time since last September to recruit and train additional guerrilla forces from tribal groups in all parts of the country. New commando units have been armed for special operations into enemy territory.

Reagan officials are particularly impressed by the development of a whole new generation of competent commanders.

In comparison to the high morale and tight discipline of UNITA, the MPLA troops seem demoralized, and there is such bad blood between the Cubans and the MPLA that the Cubans believe they have been deliberately led into ambushes by their allies.

Finally, and most important in Mr. Chitunda's judgment, there is the cumulative and widening impact on the whole region of the fact that the Reagan administration is no longer bound by the Clark Amendment and is now committed to providing UNITA with the anti-aircraft and

anti-tank weaponry it needs to hold its own against Russian tanks and helicopters.

Because of the necessity of avoiding any South African involvement, there has been some delay in arranging for the delivery of the American weapons, but UNITA leaders are now confident of obtaining them in sufficient time to equip and train their troops. Moreover, the active commitment of American arms to Mr. Savimbi's cause has encouraged a surge of new assistance to UNITA from both West European and African states.

When the MPLA offensive fails, as Reagan officials hope it will, the UNITA leaders see the beginning of the end game in Angola. UNITA commanders are already assembling the intelligence to plan for the induced defection of entire MPLA battalions. It would not take many such unit defections to begin to unravel the MPLA regime in Luanda, and the hand of the MPLA moderates who want to make a deal with UNITA would be strengthened.

In the meanwhile, all reports from recent Cuban defectors and refugees indicate that Radio Marti's Spanish language broadcasts to Cuba are very effectively reaching the Cuban people with the true costs of the decade-long war in Angola.

The war has become so unpopular that attempted draft evasion is widespread, and Reagan officials are convinced that the failure of the approaching offensive would force a serious reassessment in Havana.

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